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SUBJECT: ELECTION RUNUP: GNP GOING STRONG; LIBERAL LOSS
LOOMS

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite recent stumbles by the Grand National Party (GNP) and President Lee Myung-bak, continued attacks on Lee's appointees, and record low support for a president days after inauguration (49 percent in a March 1 Hankyoreh poll), the GNP still holds the pole position heading into the official campaign season for the April 9 National Assembly elections. Recent highlights include internecine feuding among factions in the Grand National Party (GNP) over nominations and a resurgent United Democratic Party (UDP), which has scored some political points by excluding candidates with past convictions of corruption. The UDP's inability to differentiate itself on policy, however, seemingly makes most voters reluctant to support its candidates. The end result will almost certainly be a GNP-controlled Assembly. End Summary

¶2. (C) Problems with Lee's nominees continue to make front page headlines -- the latest scandal accuses Kim Sung-ho, Lee's nominee to head the National Intelligence Service (NIS) of taking bribes from the Samsung group. Assembly contacts note Lee likely knew Kim was implicated in the Samsung investigation but nominated him anyway, assuming that people were tired of the fighting over the cabinet and that the allegations would not stick. Previously, three of Lee's nominees dropped out due to pressure from the UDP and now Lee faces criticism from all sides; even staunchly conservative dailies have chided Lee for a sloppy nomination process and encouraged him to screen his personnel selections more carefully.

¶3. (C) Former GNP Chair Park Geun-hye spoke out March 6 against the "unfair" nomination process, asking if it was a "crime" to have supported her and accused the nominating committee of retaliation against her. Many of Park's key supporters failed to gain the nomination. According to a key Park advisor, Park must fight publicly to protect her supporters who still have a chance to gain a nomination, but the current cut-throat atmosphere would not have long-reaching consequences and would not break up the party. Other GNP contacts echoed this statement, noting Park had to do all that she could, but that in reality the balance of power in the party had already shifted to President Lee Myung-bak.

GNP Set for a Big Win?

14. (C) Many political observers believe the GNP could win as many as 200 seats out of 299 in the upcoming election. Top political pollster Han Gui-young of KSOI told poloff she expected the GNP to win at least 180 seats. She told poloff that Lee and his team had made mistakes but insisted the progressive UDP had offered no viable alternative. In the crucial Seoul-Gyeonggi Province districts where 100 seats are up for grabs as well as almost half of the proportional seats (43 seats are determined by overall support for the parties while 256 are determined by district races), Han said there were no sure bets among the UDP and worse, no UDP candidate who had a favorable rating. This did not mean the GNP would sweep the seats in the region, but that the UDP would be hard pressed to win more than 30 seats in the metropolitan area.

Others Say GNP Hard Pressed to Gain a Majority

15. (C) Park Sung-min, another leading political consultant, told poloff that the UDP could win up to 40 seats in the metropolitan area (including districts in Incheon there are 112 metropolitan districts). He argued that the Assembly races were not tied to national trends, which favored the GNP, but rather depended on the people nominated and the characteristics of the district. In Korea, a nominee does not need to have any relation or history with a district and there is no residency requirement. In some cases, GNP nominees will likely be young, politically inexperienced Lee Myung-bak supporters with little local connection. These candidates will fare poorly, Park explained, especially in districts with high Jeolla-based population.

16. (C) Even more pessimistic, Lee Sung-heun, the GNP candidate for Seodaemun, told poloff that it would be difficult for the GNP to gain a majority in the Assembly. His logic was that Seoul's population overall was 35 percent from the Jeolla region (as is Lee himself) and, while these voters voted either for Lee Myung-bak or did not vote December 19, they would turn out en masse for UDP candidates in April, forming a formidable bloc. Therefore, it would be a challenge for all Seoul-based GNP candidates.

View from the UDP

17. (C) According to UDP contacts, things are looking up as the April 9 elections approach; the party should be able to win close to 100 seats. This optimism stems from recent missteps by Lee and faith that Korean voters will want to check Lee's power. Admitting the GNP's popularity far exceeded the UDP's (47.8 percent to 13.9 percent in a March 3 Hankyoreh poll), several UDP contacts noted voters might select the GNP in the party vote, but select the UDP candidate in their district because of a desire to limit Lee Myung-bak's power and accord a preference for a known local figure, if the GNP candidate is a new arrival. Many voters wanted a legitimate liberal opposition party, which would help UDP candidates. Also, the merger between the Democratic Party (DP) and the United New Democratic Party, which created the UDP, would help unite Jeolla voters in Seoul, the key to success for any UDP candidate.

18. (C) Head of the UDP nominating committee Park Seung-jae recently announced that several leading UDP figures would not receive the nomination because of past bribery and corruption convictions. This was a smart move because the GNP last month decided to allow those who had been previously convicted of election law violations to compete for the nomination.

Comment

19. (C) One month before the elections, indications are that the GNP will gain a majority, making Lee Myung-bak's life easier as he attempts to push through extensive reforms and big projects. Until April 9, all new policy proposals are on hold lest they upset the electoral balance. This means a complete lack of any meaningful policy debate. Rather, candidates are concentrating on bringing each other down on negative campaigns, particularly involving personal finance, military service, and dirt involving the candidates' family members.

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